



Psychological Coping Strategies of Chinese Exchange Students at a University in Eastern Kentucky: A Case Study

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Introduction

Each year, thousands of college students participate in student exchange experiences with international universities. Study abroad programs allow students to immerse themselves in a sociocultural context different from their own, usually in a language that is not the students' first-language. This learning process is expected to enhance cultural competence, promote intercultural sensitivity, and benefit personal and career development. However, when there are significant differences in culture between home and the host country, exchange students might deal with psychological, linguistic, and academic challenges during their transition period.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to use a case study methodology and semi-structured interview data to describe the psychological experiences and challenges faced by nine exchange students from China when studying at Morehead State University (MSU). The students' responses shed light on important psychological issues such as anxiety, stress, learning attitude, motivation, personality and coping strategies. Their experience-based suggestions will enrich the literature on the psychological well-being of international students and will inspire further work in this topic.

Materials and Methods

A semi-structured interview was conducted with eight female and one male students (average age was 22 years old) using a locally made questionnaire, which included 11 items and three major parts: personality traits, stress characteristics, and suggestions to MSU faculty, staff, and administration. All the students volunteered to participate in the interview and signed informed consent forms. The qualitative data was recorded, translated and analyzed using standard analysis techniques.

Table 1. Different Stress Factors Mentioned by Subjects

Stress Factors	Language	Courses	Environment	Interpersonal
Number	5	6	6	4
Percentage	56%	67%	67%	44%

1. Personality Traits

Purpose of exchanging. Three major purposes were identified by the participants: (1) To enhance their discipline-related content knowledge and practical skills at MSU, (2) to improve their English language abilities in listening and speaking, and (3) to widen their vision of the customs and culture in the United States.

Learning attitude. On the one hand, almost all of the Chinese students consider that the learning attitude of local students is more positive and proactive, that is, they have clearer studying goals and scheduled their learning time more autonomously. On the other hand, the exchange students were satisfied with their own learning attitude. The average score is 7, when using a 0-10 (negative-positive) learning attitude scale.

Character and change. Almost all participants considered that they had a positive personality, and preferred showing the openness and agreeableness in interpersonal communication. Participants reported becoming more independent in handling learning and living issues, and showed more courage to express themselves and in communicating after they started to study at MSU.

2. Stress and Coping Strategies

Stress factors. Table 1 shows the factors that caused the participants' negative emotions, especially stress, and how many of them mentioned these factors in the interview. Language, which was considered the source factor of other problems, mainly affected the expression and understanding of the students in areas such as learning, communicating and daily interacting. As a relevant issue, 6 participants encountered difficulty in learning in academic courses, not only because of the language but also because of homework requirements. The environmental factors, including the lack of public transport and the difference in dietary habits, were mentioned by 6 participants. Four of them mentioned interpersonal factors as the reason behind their cultural challenges and increases stress.

Coping strategies. Depending on the specific stress factors, all of the participants implemented a variety of strategies to cope with their challenges. For solving general problems, they requested assistance from the Office of International Student Services, where they obtained useful information and crucial support. For better learning in academic courses, the participants spent a significant amount of time engaged in pre-class studying, post-class review, and listening to recording of the lectures. They promoted their listening and speaking English by communicating with local students and professors as much as possible. All participants reported their stress levels significantly decreased over time after implementing the coping measures described above. Figure 1 shows the self-evaluation of their coping ability using a 0-10 (unefficient to efficient) scale. The mean score was 7.4, meaning most exchange students were satisfied with their coping ability, while others thought they could do better in the future.

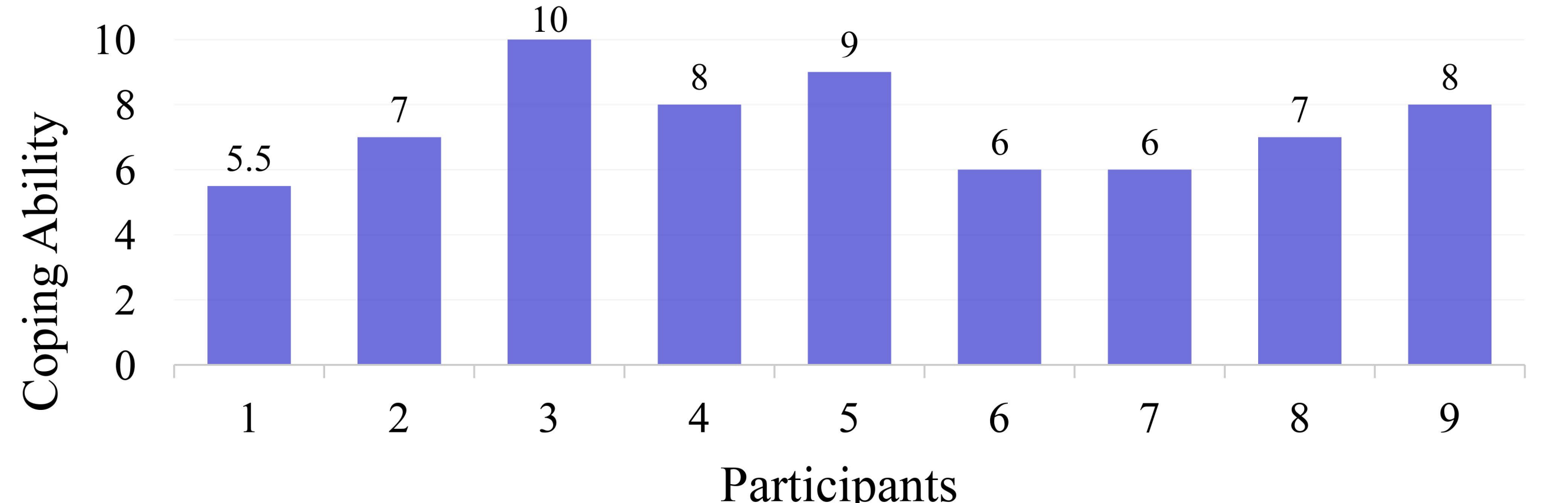


Figure 1. Participants' Self Coping Ability Scores

3. Evaluation and Suggestions

All of the participants gave high marks to the University and considered the supportive work of MSU to be beyond their expectations. They especially mentioned the attention and positive support given to them by the Office of International Student Services personnel. In addition, some professors courses and local student partners provided additional assistance for them to implement their psychological and language adaptations.

As for suggestions for reducing stress and improve the well-being of exchange students, participant feedback was categorized into three areas:

Guidance. An overall written guide to assist students in course registration, classes selection, housing, etc., would be more clear and convenient to the students.

Communication. More opportunities to talk and listen to local students and personnel should be encouraged.

Learning. The requirements of some courses were perceived to be too difficult to fulfill on account of language limitations. Some participants suggested minor reduction in course requirements for exchange students or to use a different grading system.

Conclusions

Chinese students and their families see learning aboard as beneficial for academic promotion, personal experience and employment competition. The greatest challenge, however, is to overcome stress and other psychological factors caused by the students' partial English proficiency, especially in the context of their performance in academic courses and daily communication. Overall, participants demonstrated good coping skills, resulting in a positive perception of independence and determination.

The findings of this study will add to a better understanding of the psychological challenges experienced by Chinese exchange students, and should result in more efficient support to the students' mental health, sociocultural adaptation, and academic achievement.

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Further Information

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